



Leo South's collection of antique tractors goes back almost 100 years.

Steel Survivors

Vintage tractors have interesting tales to tell

One scarcely thinks about what it takes to move something. Push a button, put the vehicle in gear, step on the throttle.

If you've spent time landscaping, you know how heavy dirt is. Plowing a field for crops requires massive power, a task that fell on draft animals like horses or oxen for centuries.

Not so very long ago, machines began to replace muscle power. "Traction engines," as the early tractors were called, could work without rest.

Tractors could sit idle for weeks. Draft animals required daily feeding. It's been estimated that draft animals ate 40% of the food they helped produce.

Tractors increased the crop yield when food was grown on a smaller scale. Food surpluses followed. Once people had enough to eat, they could pursue other endeavors. The modern age had dawned. Farming took fewer people. Many left behind the dust for the bright

lights of the city.

Not many people are around who recall when food production was key to survival. Three generations ago, people grew or raised just about all their food. Sugar and coffee were luxury items.

An old saying goes, "My grandfather had a farm. My father had a garden. I have a can opener."

Remlik relics

One man who appreciates antique tractors is Leo South of Remlik, just west of Urbanna in Middlesex County.

A dozen vintage tractors are lined up neatly at the home on Old Virginia Street where he and his wife Catherine Smith live. Some have been repainted. Others have a patina formed by decades of weather and the elements. "I got my own little museum," said South. "It's amazing the number of people who stop here and ask if they can take pictures."

Strong as steel

With improvement to the internal combustion engine in the early 1900s, steam tractors began to fade, replaced by smaller tractors that one man could operate.

One of South's tractors that stands out is a Case with steel treads on its wheel instead of rubber tires. Its brawn is that of a bull. If this machine could talk, it would tell of clearing land and wrenching stubborn stumps from the earth in places where no bulldozer could go, and how it would reel in a 3/4-inch cable on a mammoth winch that was geared to multiply torque of a straining four-cylinder engine.

But its engine has been silent for many years. Today its massive levers and controls are frozen in place. Covered in a patina of oxidation and lichens, it's a relic from a bygone machine age. It is industrial sculpture.

To South this Case tractor is more than a machine. He discovered it a couple miles from his home and approached the land owner about acquiring it. South persisted for a year before it

story and
photos
by Tom
Chillemi

Why are they called “tractors?”

Tractor's root word "tract" comes from Latin "tractus," meaning to pull or drag, which is what tractors are used for.

"Tract" shows up in many words, here are a few:

- Subtract – drag away.
- Attraction – pulls you in.
- Extract – pull out.
- Contract – pull together legally.
- Retract – pull back.
- Protracted – dragged out.

And all this time you thought "tractor" referred to "tracks" like those on a bulldozer or military tank.

The first tractors were akin to steam locomotives that had left the train tracks. They pulled plows to turn sod under. One early variation, the "traction engine" remained stationary and reeled in a cable attached to the plow. Another traction engine would reel in the cable to pull the plow back to the other side of the field.

was his — and he's not parting with it. "I've had a dozen people want to buy it," he said.

Survivors

A few years ago, scrap steel prices skyrocketed and many rusty farm implements that had been abandoned were hauled to recyclers.

South saved a few of them. No two of his tractors are the same.

A green and yellow "Oliver 88" tractor, with its front wheel set close under the frame, is among South's collection. He dug it out of the woods where it was covered in vines.

A Ford 801 was South's first tractor, acquired 30 years ago.

South also has a Ford 8N and a 9N, two tractors that were the mainstay of farms from the late 1940s into the 1970s and beyond. They are still in use and often restored by those who remember the exhaust note from the flat head engine.

Starting in 1909 Henry Ford built the Model T,

The Case is the oldest tractor in Leo South's museum.



Steel treads dug in like cleats giving ultimate traction.



The small end of the Case is still massive.



A massive winch on the Case tractor was used to "pull" trees and stumps.

If this machine could talk, it would tell of clearing land and wrenching stubborn stumps from the earth in places where no bulldozer could go.

a car that put America on wheels. Similarly, Ford's tractors were among the more popular options.

Both of South's Fords will start right up, although they are 70 years old. Like many early tractors, these Fords can be cranked by hand to start. At times, getting one of these engines running requires a bit of science. Fuel and air must be in the correct ratio — too much of either and it's no go. South doesn't like to use starting fluid, but a little bit of the highly flammable spray will make up for a fuel-air mixture that is "flooded" with too much fuel. Another remedy is to open the throttle to give the engine more air and clear out the extra fuel.

At ease

He often takes a Sunday ride on one on the 8N or 9N tractors through his property and the South's garden called "South Park" to Hilliard's Mill Pond.

At 67 years of age, South says that when he retires he'll pick a tractor to restore.



Before chain saws, this saw attachment was powered by a belt from a tractor.



This Oliver "88" tractor is nearly 70 years old. Wheels placed under the frame made maneuvering easier in tight places.



A special "fast coupling" wrench fits most bolts on the John Deere Model B.



Leo South listens to the exhaust note of an idling Ford 8N.



No two tractors are the same.



The shifter guided by a "gated" on this John Deere.



This type of sickle bar, used to cut hay, was pulled either by horses or a tractor. Power to move the oscillating cutting blades was derived from the wheels as they rotated. Its simplicity is contrasted by a mammoth fertilizer spreader.

From horse power to "horsepower"

Some of these tractors have less horsepower than today's lawn mowers. But what they lack in "horsepower," they make up with their tremendous torque — the ability to cause movement. Their purpose is to pull a plow or implement through the earth and hauling.

The word tractor comes from the Latin word "tractus" meaning to pull (see related story.) For 38 years South pulled loads at the Yorktown Naval Weapons Station driving a tractor trailer, which are sometimes called "road tractors." He retired in 2012, but he's still pulling, hauling wood chips for L.P. Rigsby Lumber Company, for whom he's worked for 30 years part time.

Catherine South said that people will tell her of other old tractors that could be added to her husband's collection. "I tell them, no thanks, that's okay, we're good," she said.

And for those who can relate to ancient horsepower and the evolution of technology, Leo South's tractors are a good thing.